

Problems in freshman English writing:

Six features of ESL compositions

大学初年次生の英文ライティングにどのような問題点が見つかるのか？

—大学初年次生の英文ライティングに見つかる 6 つの特徴—

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教育の国際化が進む昨今の状況下において、英語学習者に高度な英語力が求められてきている。その中でも、英文ライティング技術の習得は、留学を目指す日本人大学生にとり不可欠な学習準備の一つとなっている。しかし、学習者と教える側の双方にとり、英文ライティングに精通することは至難の業である。とりわけ、非英語母語話者の大学英語教員には、英文ライティングの指導面において多くの問題が課せられる。このような背景の下、本論文では、中級レベルの英語力を持つ大学初年次生の課題英文エッセーと TOEFL の模範エッセーから 2 種類のコーパスを作成し、そのコーパスに基づく比較分析を行う。そして、大学初年次生の書く英文に共通して観察される日本人特有と思われる 6 つの特徴を洗い出し、その特徴について考察を加える。一つの事例研究における本論文での考察が、ライティング指導における課題解決の一助となることを希望する。

## 1: Introduction

In the current focus on internationalization, high-level English proficiency and language performance are expected of English learners, and writing is a key skill in the academic arena in this global context. Japanese universities are now encouraging more students to study abroad. Under this mandate, writing skill has begun to draw attention and has revealed its key role in academic English proficiency. However, writing poses particular challenges. One difficulty is that writing requires productive vocabulary and “craft skill” (a term used in carpentry to describe skills to produce things with care). Another difficulty is that writing calls for academic knowledge across disciplines. An experienced ESL instructor and researcher says, “Unlike reading and listening, writing is a productive activity that requires comprehensive linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural as well as metalinguistic ability” (Kim, 2012). Another researcher introduces the idea that writing is a complex cognitive process requiring appropriate strategies (Connor, 1996). However, the reality reveals a shortage of well-trained writing teachers, whether they are native speakers (NSs) or non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. Therefore, when they study abroad, Japanese students often find that they do not know how to produce even basic academic writing. For example, Gosden (1996) introduced an example of Japanese doctoral students who had not been formally taught English academic composition until they had to write their first academic research articles. In this paper, I attempted to look at issues in Japanese students’ written English based on several features. First, I conducted a comparative corpus analysis of students’ essays and TOEFL sample essays to reveal several features of students’ writing. Second, I analyzed each feature and attempted an explanation of its application in writing.

## 2: Case study

It is not surprising that written work by Japanese EFL students often has some flaws.

Incorrect syntax is common, and lexical problems such as excessive word repetition, the overuse of expressions, and a few others are easily found. Kim (2012) mentions that the native language still controls the writing activity to a large extent and learner language makes for semantic anomalies. Thus, students' writing is marked most prominently by first-language interference that can cause weakness in their writing. To clarify where the problems come from, this case study examines students' written work, extracts some features, and analyzes the features following the approach below.

## 2-1: Students

This case study used 43 short essays written by students in two introductory writing classes at a Japanese national university. The number of students was originally 48. However, 5 students were eliminated. Those students included one sophomore repeater of the same level writing class, two students whose essays failed to follow the rules for submission, and two students who were unable to finish their essay assignments. All 43 students had taken the TOEFL-ITP<sup>1</sup> test to assess their English level one week after university matriculation. Their scores ranged from 453 to 463 points. This score range corresponds very closely to 456.7, the average TOEFL-ITP score taken by Japanese university students in 2011-2012 academic year according to a report by CIEE.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the academic English proficiency of these 43 students is labeled "intermediate-level" within the population of Japanese university students.

Figure 1 displays the 43 students' writing experience in English. About four out of five students (83%) had written in English from 100 to 300 words in length before coming to university, but in many cases that writing was English translation of Japanese texts. This translation-type of

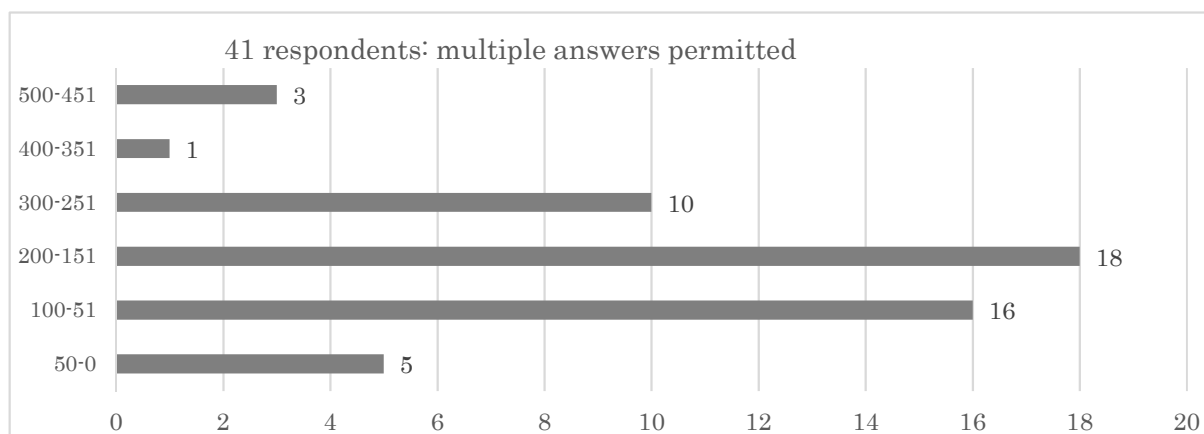
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<sup>1</sup> TOEFL-ITP (Test of English as a Foreign Language, Institutional Testing Program)

<sup>2</sup> CIEE (Council on International Educational Exchange 国際教育交換協議会)

writing aims to prepare students for the second-stage entrance exam at many highly-ranked private universities and national universities. According to information from several cram schools, the successful strategy is to demonstrate proper choice of English words and expressions, and grammatical accuracy within the sentence-level translation. This suggests English teachers should be aware that the majority of students at university are novice writers in academic writing that requires to write paragraph and essay level writing in a coherent manner.

Figure 1 Students’ writing experiences



※ X axis: no. of words written; Y axis: no. of students responding

## 2-2 Materials, corpus, and tools

Two kinds of data were used in this case study. One type was short essays written by the 43 students. These essays were the third writing assignments in the final project in 2017 spring semester classes. The course syllabus instructed that the students could choose one essay topic and the number of words from each three options in their writing assignments. Table 1 shows the topics and the total number of words appearing in the 43 essays they wrote.

Table 1 Topics and the number of words appearing in 43 essays

Topic	Number of words			Total
	800 to 700	699 to 600	599 to 500	
A university/college education is necessary	2	3	4	9

Priority seating is beneficial/valuable	3	9	5	17
24/7 convenience stores are beneficial/valuable	8	2	7	17
	13	14	16	43

The other kind of data is sample essays taken from a TOEFL writing book. Every sample essay has a full score of 6 points on a 6-point scale. That is, each essay is a perfect model for English learners. 70 persuasive essays were chosen from the book to create the equivalent size of corpus to compare with the 43 student essays. As it turned out, the topic of “A university/college education is necessary” was coincidentally an option both for the TOEFL sample essays and students’ essays in 2017 spring term.

Table 2 Material and corpus

material	number	essay type	corpus
Freshmen’s essays	43	persuasive	27,841 words
TOEFL sample essays	70		24,630 words

2-3: Six features

Four steps were taken before examining the students’ essays.

Step 1: Take notes with a focus on problematic features while grading students’ short essays

Step 2: Create Excel spreadsheet A from all the notes in Step 1 above.

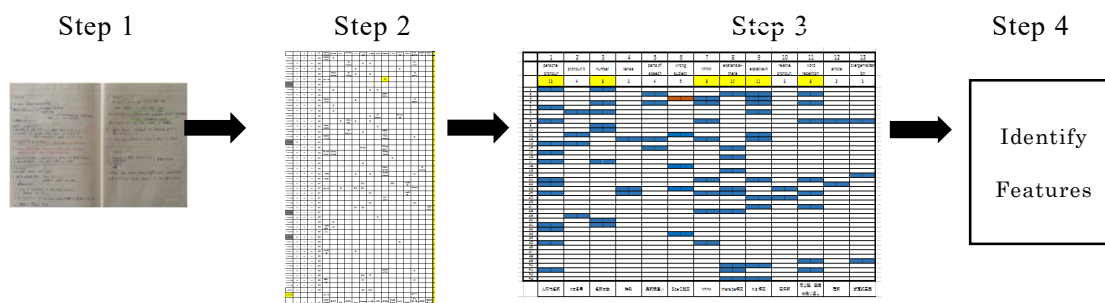
The sheet has students’ names in the leftmost row and the features in the right rows.

Students’ names have been changed to protect their identity.

Step 3: Make Excel spreadsheet B for selected features on spreadsheet A.

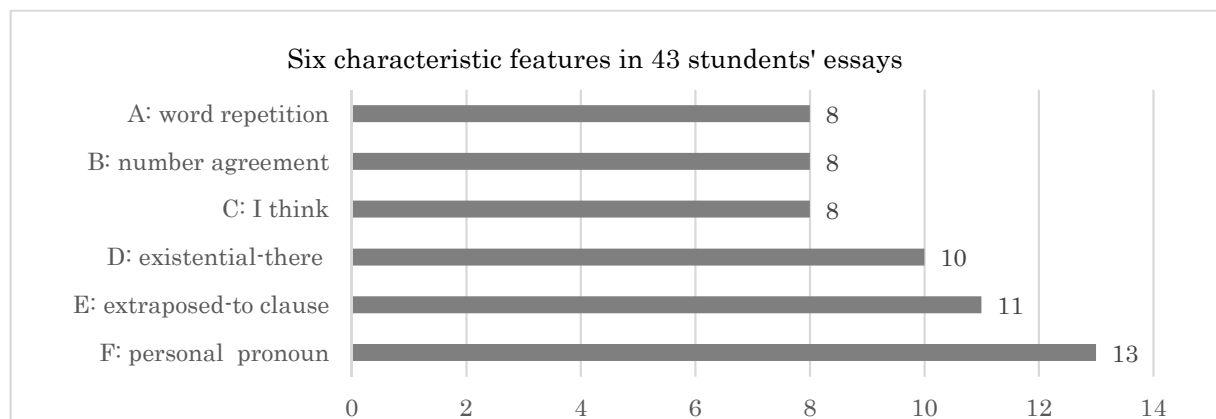
Spreadsheet B shows who used which feature in his or her writing.

Step 4: Choose several features with high frequencies.



Six items were chosen as characteristic features based on the idea that a characteristic feature should appear in at least in one essay out of five. Figure 2 shows the six features.

Figure 2: Six characteristic features in 43 students' essays



#### 2-4: Corpus tools

Two corpora in Table 3 and two free-online tool kits in Table 4 were used for examination and analysis. The editing function of Microsoft Word's word processing software was also used for searching for word repetition and grammatical mistakes as necessary. Table 4 shows the combinations of tools and six features in the examination.

Table 3 Tools used in comparative analysis

Corpus analysis toolkit	Creator	Purpose of use
AntConc (3.4.4)	Laurence Anthony	Word search and word frequency
Word Level Checker (WLC)	Yasumasa Someya	Vocabulary level check and word frequency

Table 4 Tools in analysis

	Features	WLC	AntConc	Microsoft Word's editing function
A	Word repetition	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
B	Number agreement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
C	"I think"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
D	Existential "there"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
E	Extraposition	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	and “it” cleft			
F	Personal pronouns	○	○	○

### 3 Discussion

This section discusses six features in descendant order from A to F as seen in Table 4 above. All samples appearing in this article are portions of the students’ original essays reproduced without modification.

#### 3-1 Feature A: Word repetition

Excessive word repetition is very common in students’ writing. In contrast, constant repetition of the same words is not found in TOEFL sample essays. Samples A and B from students’ essays each show typical cases of word repetition in one short paragraph. Academic writing textbooks often indicate students that they can repeat key nouns or key verbs in creating a coherent text. However, the overuse of the same words is not a good strategy in writing. Avoiding word repetition is a major obstacle that teachers and students struggle with in writing.

##### Sample A (as it appears in the original essay)

It is very kind action to give up seat to other people. To make it more smooth to give up seat, it is not effective to provide priority seats in one section of the train or bus. Various measures have already been taken. For example, in Yokohama city subway, all seats can exchange without setting priority seats. This system makes people feel more considerate by eliminating the concept of priority seat. As you can see from these examples, the concept of priority seats is no longer necessary. As a result, I disagree with priority seat system in order to make priority people live more comfortable.

##### Sample B (as it appears in the original essay)

If you are hungry at night, you can eat foods at a family restaurant or get them at a convenience store. Suddenly when you need something, you can get it at convenience stores soon. I often use a convenience store to buy foods and drinks when I got back late. According to a survey on convenience stores that targeted

college students in 2005, 24% people use convenience stores between 22 o'clock and 6 o'clock, which is called the late night band. It is also said that about 5 million people use convenience stores during that time per a day. These statistics and my experiment show the importance and the necessity of stores opened 24 hours in our lives.

### 3-2: Feature B Number agreement

Students' samples showed 26 cases of number disagreement between singular / plural subjects (S) and present-tense verbs (V), while the TOEFL sample essays had no such basic grammatical mistakes. The Japanese language does not require number agreement between a subject and a verb. Students often claim that they "know" about S-V agreement in English. However, student samples C and D show typical cases of S-V number disagreement found in students' writing, which occur more commonly, but not exclusively, when a subject and a verb have a distance between them.

#### Sample C

In fact, **abolishing** overnight shop **have** some advantage, but **that have** some disadvantage, too.

#### Sample D

In Japan, **people** who **is** more than 65 years old **is** called senior people.

### 3-3 Feature C I think

*I think* was a unique feature found in this research. Table 5 shows a significant difference in the frequency of *I think* between the two groups of essays .

Table 5 The use of I think

	Frequency
Students' essays	108
TOEFL sample essays	8

Persuasive essays have to convince readers of the writer's opinion based on facts. The writer's personal feelings and ideas are not expected in this type of essay in English. According to linguistic



dictionaries, personal feelings, attitudes, value judgment, and assessment are a matter of *stance*. Moreover, Biber (2006) suggests that the verb *think* plus *that-clauses* are used in spoken English registers, but rare in the written registers. In Japanese, on the other hand, “I think” occurs quite frequently in formal essays. To summarise these points, the frequent occurrence of *I think* is considered to be a misuse of *stance* and *register* in persuasive writing. Therefore, a high frequency of *I think* suggests that writing teachers have to be conscious of stylistic devices as well as grammatical accuracy in writing.

### 3-4 Feature D Existential “there”

Another frequent construction was “there be something” sentences. Table 6 shows the result of the comparative analysis. Interestingly, the result suggests that both types of essays use this sentence pattern more in present tense than in past tense.

Table 6 “there be something”

Form of verb “to be” used	Frequency of “there be something”				Total
	is	are	was	were	
Students’ essays	72	109	5	2	188
TOEFL sample essays	27	39	1	0	67

This “there be something” sentence is syntactically referred to as “existential there”. The use of “there be something” affirms that something is, or exists (Kollin, 2007). “There be something” in student sample E suggests the existence of demerits of overnight shops. However, by switching “there be something” to “have something” in possession, sample E becomes more concise and sounds more natural since “have” and “demerit” can go together naturally in English. Many similar cases are found in students’ writing and indicate that they do not think of using “have something” even when they can use it for expressing possession.

Sample E


[T]here are more demerits of overnight shop. (existence)

⇒ Overnight shops have more demerits (possession)

Sample E indicates a significant difference between English and Japanese discourse. Ikegami (1981, 2006) insightfully introduces the argument that Japanese is a “be” language while English is a “have” language: in the expression of possession, Japanese tends to use existence verbs such as the verb “to be” while English tends to use possession verbs such as the verb “to have.” Hinds (1986) also observes the same two different discourse contexts as Ikegami suggests. Both researchers explain that English expressions tend to clarify an actor in a possessive expression, while Japanese is likely to put more focus on a situation than an actor. According to Hinds (1986), existential expressions and possessive expressions exemplify this difference. These two expressions do not overlap in English, but they can be blended in Japanese (Figure 2). One test can illustrate this difference. If Japanese students are asked to translate “2つの質問があります” (*Futatsu no shitsumon ga arimasu*) into English, some students may say “there are two questions” using an existential expression. English native speakers, on the other hand, will say, “I have two questions” using a possessive expression with an actor. This example shows the overlap between existential expression and possessive expression in Japanese language, and suggests that writing teachers need to raise rhetorical awareness on the overuse of “there be something” sentences in students’ writing.

Figure 2

	English (person-focused)	Japanese (situation-focused)
<b>existential</b>	There + be + something Something(S) + be + preposition	～がいる、ある ( ~ga iru / aru)
<b>possession</b>	Somebody’s something Something of somebody	～を持っている



	<b>Somebody(S) + have + something</b>	<b>( ~ wo motte iru )</b>
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3-5 Feature E Extraposition and “it”-cleft structures

“It be something” sentences presented the second highest frequency in this case study. These include extraposed structures and “it”-cleft structures. “To” clauses and “that” clauses are the most common type of postponed subjects in an extraposed structure, and they work as a logical subject. Adjectives often come after “It be.” Table 7 shows the frequencies in three types of sentence pattern, and Table 8 shows frequencies for adjectives used after “It be.”

Table 7 Frequency of extrapositions and cleft sentences

	Postponed subject in “it+ extraposed structure”		“it” cleft	Total
	“To” clause	“That” clause		
Students’ essays	83	47	79	209
TOEFL sample essays	33	12	32	77

Table 8 Adjectives

Students’ essays	
Word	Frequency
important	13
difficult	13
necessary	11
convenient	9
hard	5
easy	2
useful	2
helpful	2
large	1
major	1

TOEFL sample essays	
Word	Frequency
difficult	4
good	3
easy	2
important	2
new	2
impossible	2
bad	1
common	1
kind	1
possible	1

\*Eleven other adjectives appeared once each.

\*Seven other adjectives appeared once each.

The reason why students’ essays had many extraposed sentence patterns may go back to their

English education in middle school. This structure is one of the target structures that junior high students must learn for the high school entrance exam, according to the Course of Study English junior high school. Presumably this sentence pattern is simple enough for them to acquire and produce successfully. I assume this situation may explain its high frequency in students' essays. This sentence pattern is most common in academic prose (Biber et.al., 2002). Therefore, using this sentence pattern is appropriate in essay writing. The issue, as writing textbooks often warn, is its overuse and resulting wordiness. Kolln (2007) says, however, "When they are used in the right place and for the right reason, they are not redundant, unnecessary words; they are, in fact, doing an important job." He argues that writers should pay more attention to proper and effective use of these two sentence patterns. Here, he means rhetorical appropriateness and effectiveness. Teachers need to increase their awareness of the extent to which students gravitate towards using the "it be something" pattern in order to enable students to avoid its overuse.

3-6 Feature F Two generic personal pronouns

Personal pronouns are an important tool in writing for coherence. Since the first-person pronoun *I* was already introduced in the section on *I think* (Feature C) with a discussion of the aspect of stance and register, this last part focuses on the plural subject personal pronouns *we* and *you*. Third-person *they* is another plural subject pronoun; it was eliminated from this discussion for simplification. As Table 9 shows, *we* and *you* were examined for this study.

Table 9 Usage of "we" and "you"

Subject pronoun	we	you
Students' essays	161	146
TOEFL sample essays	168	150

The two essay groups showed very similar frequencies in the generic use of *we* and *you*. In spite of this result, these two pronouns are often the source of some flaws in students' writing. If the

differences between the two groups are not a matter of frequency, then what can be the issue of *we* and *you* in students' writing? To clarify the point, students' essays were re-examined with a focus on the locations of these two pronouns. One interesting discovery was inconsistency. In the TOEFL sample essays, once a writer started to use *we* or *you* for generic pronoun in the essay, the writer used the same *we* or *you* consistently until the end of the essay. On the other hand, there was a good deal of switching back and forth in students' essay. Samples F and G show sentences in two students' essays.

#### Sample F

In transport facilities, such as trains and bus, we usually see priority seats that person injured or elder can sit on preferentially.----- For example, if you sit on the priority seat and an elderly woman searching for a vacant seat stands in front of you, you should stand up and let her sit down.

#### Sample G

In addition, by doing a part-time job, you can accumulate various experiences before saving to society by saving money for the future or going abroad with friends. By going to the university like this, it is necessary as we can secure time for yourself.

The pronoun *we* has two types, inclusive and exclusive. While inclusive *we* refers to the writer and reader together, exclusive *we* refers solely to the writer and other persons associated with the writer (Hardwood, 2005). Thus *we* always includes the writer, whether the usage be inclusive or exclusive. On the other hand, *you* refers directly to the reader, or the reader and people in general. That is to say, *we* and *you* are markers to cast the writer's perspective towards the reader. The reader has to catch these perspective markers while reading. If the writer's perspective often changes, this inconsistency makes for confusion. As a matter of style, Biber and other researchers (2002) mention that "*We* is typical of written style in English, and *you* is typical spoken English." When taken together, teachers can advise students that they should avoid a mixed use of generic *we* and *you* in

one writing discourse, and that *we* may be a better choice in academic writing.

#### 4 Summary and conclusion

This paper demonstrated six characteristic features found in students' essays using comparative corpus analysis. Each feature suggests that teaching writing should include more linguistic and rhetorical perspectives, along with a focus on cultural style as mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Japanese English education has focused more attention on speaking skills since communicative competence gained prominence in the 1990s. At the same time, writing has found itself taking the lowest priority in schools. This circumstance resulted in the weakness of English writing education in the Japanese EFL context. In many cases, Japanese teachers have an even greater burden in teaching academic writing since they themselves were not trained in writing during their schooling. The case study in this paper has limitations in the size of corpus, the method for listing features, and the use of analytical tools. It is hoped, however, that several findings from this study will provide useful information to further research and classroom application in teaching writing.

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